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Populism in Venezuela: the rise of Chavismo

KIRK HAWKINS

ABSTRACT *In the 1990s Venezuela experienced the rise of a new anti-party movement built around the figure of Hugo Chávez and dedicated to the fundamental transformation of society, a movement that most Venezuelans call Chavismo. If we define populism in strictly political terms—as the presence of what some scholars call a charismatic mode of linkage between voters and politicians, and a democratic discourse that relies on the idea of a popular will and a struggle between 'the people' and 'the elite'—then Chavismo is clearly a populist phenomenon. Chavismo relies on charismatic linkages between voters and politicians, a relationship largely unmediated by any institutionalised party. It also bases itself on a powerful, Manichaean discourse of 'the people versus the elite' that naturally encourages an 'anything goes' attitude among Chávez's supporters. In this paper I demonstrate these points through a descriptive account, based on interviews performed in Caracas during autumn 1999, May 2000 and February 2003, as well as on published texts available in Venezuela. I also use this account to support an analytical claim that these populist qualities undermine Chavismo's democratic goals.*

This article provides a descriptive case study of Chavismo, the movement that supports President Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. It argues that Chavismo meets the minimal political definition of populism recently proposed by Weyland (2001), Roberts (1995; 2002) and de la Torre (2000). By this I mean that Chavismo relies on a charismatic mode of linkage between voters and politicians, a relationship largely unmediated by any institutionalised party, and that it bases itself on a powerful, Manichaean discourse of 'the people versus the elite' that naturally encourages an 'anything goes' attitude among Chávez's supporters. The study also argues that, contrary to the claims of some sympathisers and adherents of Chavismo, these populist qualities undermine the movement's democratic potential.

I do not wish to suggest that Chavismo can be considered an example of neopopulism. It is true that Chavismo is in many ways an extraordinary phenomenon in Venezuela, a country that for nearly 40 years had a political system dominated by two highly institutionalised parties. In this sense of being 'new' we might want to call it neopopulist. However, if we associate this label with the ideological or policy content of the movement, in particular the advocacy of

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neoliberalism, it is clearly inappropriate: Chavismo has a strong leftist, anti-globalisation flavour and has largely eschewed market-oriented reforms (Ellner, 1999). Likewise, if we associate the label with the unique coalition-building strategy of recent populist regimes, one that involves a simultaneous appeal not just to the informal and middle sectors but also to the wealthy elite (Dresser, 1997; Gibson, 1997), Chavismo again seems far from the mark: it has never derived serious electoral support from the upper-income groups in Venezuela, relying instead on significant middle class support that has gradually vanished, and a faithful core of supporters in the informal sector. Thus, Chavismo is certainly an extraordinary phenomenon that deserves inclusion in any study of populism during the past two decades, but it is apparently a populism without adjectives.

In order to make this argument, I begin by briefly explaining the definition of populism that I use. I then provide a short history of the rise of Chavismo in Venezuela. Following this, I describe the movement's populist attributes, using data from Venezuelan texts and a series of interviews with Chavistas carried out over the past three years.

Defining populism

As some of the recent studies of populism have ably noted, populism is a contested concept. Much of this confusion results from the tendency to lump together a set of social, economic and political phenomena that occurred together during the early part of the 20th century. However, the occasional reappearance of the political part of the phenomenon in subsequent years, apparently independent of many of the economic and social attributes of 'classic' populism, suggests that a narrower definition of the word would be useful.

I agree with these conclusions and define populism in terms of two political criteria: the presence of a charismatic mode of linkage between voters and politicians, and a democratic discourse that relies on the idea of a popular will and a struggle between 'the people' and 'the elite'. The first part of this definition—the concept of charismatic linkages—refers to the exchange relationship between voters and politicians. Since at least the writings of Weber, scholars have noted the tendency for this exchange relationship to conform to certain modes, defined by the type of goods exchanged and the way in which the exchange takes place (Lawson, 1980; Kitschelt, 2000; Roberts, 2001). Thus a relationship characterised by the conditional or direct exchange of votes for selective incentives is referred to as one of clientelistic linkages, and a relationship characterised by the unconditional or indirect exchange of votes for policy is referred to as one of programmatic linkages (Graziano, 1975; Kitschelt, 2000; Hawkins, 2003).[1] The charismatic mode of linkage—a term that explicitly refers to Weber's definition of charisma—is an exceptional mode of linkage in which voters support candidates in exchange for a promise of radical change by a person of extraordinary, quasi-divine character and skills, not for a promise of any particular kind or quantity of goods. Demonstrations of the candidates' character thus become more significant than the actual content of the promises they make. As Weber noted, charismatic linkages are the product of crises of

periods of 'distress', moments when existing institutions have clearly failed to generate solutions to society's deepest problems (Weber, 1958: 245). Insofar as existing institutions no longer appear capable of performing their functions (in particular, those of reducing uncertainty and eliminating opportunistic behaviour by politicians and voters—see Kiewiet and McCubbins (1991) and Moe (1984)), both these groups of people seek a candidate capable of operating outside the old institutions and generating new ones. Given the high level of authority being delegated and the risk that this entails, voters and politicians ascribe great importance to the candidates' character as a kind of insurance against opportunism.

As scholars have repeatedly noted, populist leaders are always charismatic leaders (Conniff, 1999; de la Torre, 2000; Weyland, 2001: 14). This characteristic explains one key attribute of populism, what Weyland calls its 'direct' linkages to the voters. Populist movements involve a relationship between the national executive and the voters that is unmediated by institutionalised parties. By institutionalised I mean that the party relies on a set of rules rather than the whim of its leader for governing itself, and that the party possesses an identity that is independent of and more significant than that of its leader or founder (Selznick, 1957; Panebianco, 1988). Populist movements are appropriately so called, because they are highly uninstitutionalised and often bring together a heterogeneous group of individuals and organisations tied to each other only by a common allegiance to their leader. However, this lack of individual party institutionalisation is not an independent characteristic of populism; it is an inevitable by-product of charismatic linkages. A charismatic leader cannot be subject to a party organisation and still be considered a true charismatic—he must be above the rule of other men. The voters do not want to see their charismatic leader being bound by his followers, and the charismatic leader typically resists or at least feels ambivalent about the prospects of his organisation acquiring a life of its own (Panebianco, 1988: 145–147; Hawkins 2003). Thus low institutionalisation of the organisations that mediate this linkage is indeed an attribute of populism, but it is more of a corollary than a premise.

I also define populism in terms of reliance on a democratic discourse that emphasises the existence of a popular will and the idea of 'the people vs the elite'. As de la Torre notes, 'I see populism as a style of political mobilization based on strong rhetorical appeals to the people and crowd action on behalf of a leader' (2000: 4). The very word 'populism' (rooted in the Latin word *populus* or 'people') refers to a modern democratic context, a situation in which almost all adults in society are accorded equal political value. However, as de la Torre emphasises, populism is based on a particular kind of democratic discourse. The populist appeals to an exaggerated notion of popular sovereignty, one that in Rousseau-like fashion presumes the existence of a single popular will. The populist claims to represent 'the people' while his opponents necessarily represent a minority group of outsiders or others. Bear in mind that all democratic societies have socioeconomic differences and some notion of 'the people' (the body of citizens that somehow incorporates the most cherished national values), and thus have the discursive potential for a populist appeal, but that in Latin America the persistence of significant objective differences in status and

wealth gives the label more resonance and utility as a political construct. The region's legacy of exploitation and class distinctions, rooted in the colonial experience, means that the bulk of the population is on the bottom of the socio-economic totem pole. This segment of the population has historically received neither respect nor representation, and even today suffers a frequent lack of responsiveness on the part of governments. When times are good and the politicians make the appropriate gestures, the elitist character of government is ignored, but when times are bad or the politicians display too much arrogance, the old resentments become available to political entrepreneurs. Even when Latin American governments are democratic in every procedural sense, their substantive failings can keep the discourse alive. Thus, populist discourse in Latin America typically pits 'the people' against a presumed 'elite', although the exact content of this 'other' can vary.

This peculiar discursive base leads to two corollary attributes of populism. On the one hand, the populist leader confronts a material expedient: having opted for the democratic path to power, and arguing that it is possible for him to represent a presumably majoritarian 'people', he must get large numbers of votes to win office. Thus, as Weyland notes, 'Under populism an individual leader seeks or exercises government power based on support from large numbers of followers' (2001: 12). Likewise populism can lead to what de la Torre calls the 'Manichaean discourse' of populism, or what McGuire (in examining hegemonic party movements in Argentina) calls an 'anything goes' attitude (McGuire, 1995). If the leader embodies the popular will, the opposition must be corrupt and illegitimate, and any means (including violence) can be legitimately employed against them. The consequence of this discourse is often paradoxical, as popular sovereignty begins to smother the rights of minorities, or as the charismatic leader uses his claim that he embodies a unique popular will to undermine the institutions of government that provide checks and balances and ensure democratic contestation.

Thus, many of these latter attributes of political style (the appeal to large numbers of voters, an anything goes attitude towards democratic institutions) are inevitable aspects of populism. However, like the 'direct appeal' of the populist mentioned above, they are best seen as consequences of more fundamental characteristics—in this case as derivatives of its discursive base. I therefore define populism as a charismatic mode of linkages combined with a democratic discourse that emphasises the embodiment of a popular will.

A history of Chavismo

Before describing the qualities that allow us to describe Chavismo as 'populist', it will be useful to recount a history of the movement.[2] Chavismo—or as its adherents have sometimes called it, the Bolivarian Revolutionary Front or the Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement—has its immediate beginnings in a movement in the Venezuelan Armed Forces called the Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario 200 (MBR) or Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement 200. MBR 200 was first organised in December 1983 by Hugo Chávez and fellow younger officers trying to alter the perceived inequities and corruption of Venezuelan

society. These officers were partly inspired by a new nationalist curriculum being taught in the national military university in the early 1970s, but also by their own middle-class origins, as well as contacts that some of them had made with leftist–nationalist conspirators from outside the army beginning in about 1980 (Tarre Briceño, 1994; Valdez & Santodomingo, 1998: 15; *Zeta*, 1999: 18–19; Garrido, 1999; 2000; Medina, 1999: 17, 93–132). Members of MBR 200 operated clandestinely, biding their time while they moved up the military ranks, and gradually increasing their numbers while they made plans for a civil–military revolution. They accelerated their efforts after the Armed Forces were called in to repress the *Caracazo*, a massive riot in February 1989 that was sparked by a rise in petrol prices following the initiation of an economic adjustment package. The repressive action disillusioned many soldiers who felt that the government was acting against the legitimate interests of the poorer segments of the population (Medina, 1999). By the beginning of 1992 events seemed to have reached a climax for the movement: most of the country was disenchanted with the government, the movement's leaders occupied positions of strength in the army, and there were increasing fears that the movement had been discovered by military intelligence (Medina, 1999; Blanco, 1998: 11; Garrido, 1999; 2000; Blanco Muñoz, 1998).

On 4 February 1992 the leaders of MBR 200 attempted a coup against the highly unpopular administration of President Carlos Andres Perez, the president who had initiated the economic reform package in 1989. Although the conspirators were defeated by elements of the armed forces loyal to the government and strongly denounced by legislators and leaders of the traditional parties, they received considerable popular support.[3] A decisive moment actually came at the end of the coup, when Chávez, the leader of both MBR 200 and the coup, was allowed to speak to television cameras in order to get other officers to lay down their arms. Chávez only spoke briefly; however, his appearance 'contributed more to destabilizing Venezuelan democracy in two minutes than all the shots fired through the night' (Naím, 1993: 101). His youthful, commanding presence, his homespun language, his evident sincerity and patriotism, his willingness to shoulder the blame for the failure of the coup, and his confident assertion that change would still come were a stark contrast with President Perez and many of the well known national leaders of the traditional parties (Tarre Briceño, 1994: 123–133).[4]

In prison during the next two years, the conspirators and particularly Chávez had the chance to reorganise and make new plans for the future while they received visits from numerous Venezuelans who idolised them or saw them as potential leaders of a new movement for political change (*Primicias*, 1998, 10; interview No 13.1, 1999; Zago, 1992). Although many of the former officers remained in the group, the emerging movement centred on Chávez and was increasingly civilian.

The process of political organisation accelerated after 1994 when the new president, Rafael Caldera, pardoned the conspirators and encouraged them and their allies to participate peacefully in electoral politics (interview No 16.1, 1999: 5–6; Egaña, 1999: 26–27). Some of the former officers immediately began to get involved in politics on an individualised basis with a much more reformist

programme. Chávez and his closest allies, however, maintained a more defiant posture and remained aloof from elections. This latter group took advantage of the next few years to undergo a programme of self-education in the country's problems and its possible solutions by travelling around the country, meeting Venezuelans, and studying books and ideas suggested to them by confidants. By 1997 there was a sizeable group of civilian and military activists ready to organise for electoral competition around this broader project of 'democratic revolution'. On 21 October 1997 over 200 people met in Caracas and signed the charter that legally organised the Fifth Republic Movement (MVR), the party that would serve as the official electoral vehicle of Chávez and those of his closest allies who did not already belong to a party (MVR, 1998a: 11–16).

The movement's rise to electoral prominence following the organisation of MVR was rapid and exceeded the expectations of even its own activists (Interviews No 10.1 and 13.1, 1999). The first elections it competed in were the national elections at the end of 1998. The elections focused on the presidential race, with Hugo Chávez as the movement's candidate against Acción Democrática's (AD) official candidate, the powerful Secretary General Luis Alfaro Ucero, and two other independents: Irene Saez, mayor of the wealthiest municipality in Venezuela; and Henrique Salas Romer, a conservative businessman from one of the states outside Caracas. Saez was the early front runner. Her tenure as mayor was widely regarded as successful, and her position as an independent converted her into a focal point for voters frustrated with the traditional parties. Chávez was still a dark horse and many people feared him because of his inflammatory rhetoric and because of his ties to the radical Left and the coupists.

However, as the campaign progressed, Chávez toned down his message and tried to portray himself as a more capable leader of change than Saez, a former Miss Universe. These changes improved his chances considerably, and his campaign received an additional boost when Saez decided to accept the endorsement of the Christian Democratic party, COPEI. During an election when the one thing the voters wanted most was radical change in the old democratic regime dominated by the traditional parties, this was a fatal mistake. The traditional parties fell to an all-time low in the congressional elections in November, although AD did manage to maintain a very small plurality in the Congress, and both AD and COPEI kept control of a number of state governorships. Chávez and his coalition were now the clear front runners, and he won the presidential election in December with an absolute majority of the votes.

Over the next two years Chávez and his coalition of supporters enjoyed tremendous success at carrying out the initial part of their 'democratic revolution' (MVR, 1998b). Not only did they get voters to ratify a new constitution in December 1999 (written in a Constituent Assembly dominated almost entirely by Chávez's supporters), but the coalition also won control of a majority of the seats in Congress and many governorships, mayorships, and state/city councils in two 'mega-elections' held in July and December 2000. By the end of that year, the national government was firmly under the control of Chávez, and the traditional governing parties of AD and COPEI were reduced to electoral insignificance, filled with internal squabbling, and bankrupt.

Given these real political results, it is perhaps unsurprising that Chávez enjoyed continued high approval ratings throughout his first year in office, despite a deepening economic recession with unemployment rates of up to 15% (the highest in the region) and a decline in GDP of 7.2% during 1999 (Maracara & Nicolas, 2000; Pons, 1999; *El Universal*, 25 December 1999; Banco Central de Venezuela, 2000). In early December 1999, almost a year after taking office, his approval rating still stood at 76% (*El Universal*, 9 December 1999: I-17).

However, by 2001 Chávez had begun to experience a typical, if delayed decline in his popularity, as can be seen in the survey data of presidential approval in Figure 1. His movement suffered continual defections as old comrades and moderate allies turned away from what they perceived to be an increasingly radical, personalistic project. As early as the 2000 elections many of his former co-conspirators had defected to run against him for the presidency, united around the figure of Franciso Arias Cárdenas, Chávez's principal partner in MBR 200 and the failed coup of 1992. Business allies withdrew their support and the press (as they did with every government of the past few decades) displayed images and ran stories about what they considered the failures and corruption of a movement that had deceived them.[5] By the first quarter of 2002 Chávez's approval rating had fallen below 40%.

Chávez reacted very aggressively to these developments. Deprived of favourable press coverage, he turned increasingly to his weekly television and radio programmes to communicate with the public, and he made frequent, long speeches that private networks and radio stations were required to broadcast. In these speeches Chávez used inflammatory rhetoric that targeted the media, business, foreign countries, and even individuals who opposed him. In 2001 he encouraged the organisation of Círculos Bolivarianos to mobilise civil society and defend the revolution; a few of these groups armed themselves and began making threats or attacks against the perceived enemies of the revolution. Meanwhile, Chávez pressed forward with attempts to reform the educational

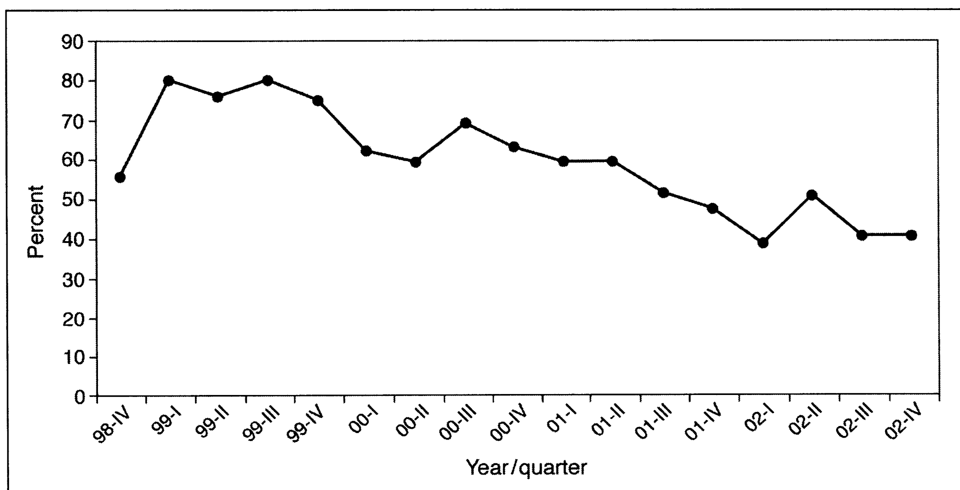


FIGURE 1. Percentage approval of Chávez, 1998–2002.

curriculum in ways that celebrated his Bolivarian ideology, to carry out land redistribution, and to build diplomatic ties with foreign governments such as Iraq, Libya, China, and especially Cuba. Relations with Cuba were controversial, because they revealed a strong friendship between Castro and Chávez and eventually led to a programme of preferentially priced oil shipments similar to those sometimes granted to poorer neighbours in the Caribbean.

What finally almost broke the regime, however, were Chávez's attempts to restructure the national oil company, PDVSA. Many Venezuelans perceived PDVSA as one of the few government companies that ran efficiently, and it was seen as a source of pride and national wealth. After Chávez publicly fired the top managers of the company during one of his television programmes in April 2002, the opposition mobilised several demonstrations in favour of PDVSA leadership and against the government. The demonstrations culminated in a march of over one million Caraqueños on 11 April. Their march was peaceful, but after they spontaneously began to move on the nearby presidential palace, Chávez's armed groups tried to block them and a group of masked sharpshooters began firing on the crowd. About 20 people were killed in the confused exchange of gunfire. Chávez's top officers resisted his orders to call out additional troops and demanded his resignation; Chávez agreed and was sent to a nearby military base.

Chavismo might have ended there, but the interim civilian president began issuing edicts that appeared dictatorial. This sparked disagreement among the commanding officers about who should be leading the coup, and in an effort to head off civil unrest they agreed to bring Chávez back to power. By 12 April he was back in office. Initially, Chávez and his top allies were contrite, but he quickly resumed his inflammatory rhetoric, allowed the National Assembly to eviscerate the commission investigating the incidents of 11 April, and removed the officers that had rebelled. The press increasingly became the target of threats and violence. The level of polarisation grew, and by the end of November, a group of dissident military officers had declared a 'peaceful coup' by resigning and setting up a headquarters in the main plaza of the eastern part of the city. The plaza served as the focal point for the mobilisation of the opposition, including Fedecamaras, the Venezuelan Workers Confederation (CTV), and most opposition political parties.

The polarisation culminated in a two-month-long national strike that began on 2 December 2002. Galvanised by recent events such as the military intervention in the Metropolitan Police, organisers openly called for the convocation of a national referendum on Chávez's continuation in office. Their strike was initially meant to be short, but Chávez's refusal to give in hardened the opposition, and the strike continued until the beginning of February when it petered out without having achieved its objectives. Although the strike failed in its immediate goal, it badly damaged the economy and sharply curtailed the government's oil revenues. Chávez not only remained adamant in the face of these setbacks, but set out to punish the opposition by firing over one-third of PDVSA's workforce and calling on judges to punish the leaders of the opposition; his economic ministers froze the exchange rate and began imposing price controls to compensate for the fiscal deficit and the downward spiral of the economy. The level of opposition demonstrations was greatly diminished in the following weeks, but most Venezuelans

continued to disapprove of Chávez's term in office. The economy seemed to be headed for disaster, sacrificed to the political logic of the Bolivarian revolution.

Chavismo as populism

Hugo Chávez and the movement supporting his ascent to power closely fit the minimal political definition of populism suggested in this article and in recent work. In fact, Chavismo is arguably a paradigmatic example of populism.

Although Chávez is already understood by most Venezuelans to be what we have defined here as a populist (Chávez himself would not use this word because of the negative meaning he assigns to it—see Blanco Muñoz, 1998: 119), there is some question among scholars who study Venezuela about what kind of populist he is. In a recent article Steve Ellner (2001) provides a well substantiated argument that Chávez is a different populist from either the classical or the neopopulist kind. On the one hand, Chávez has obviously eschewed neoliberal rhetoric and has implemented only a minimal level of the macroeconomic policies or reforms that could be considered part of the Washington consensus. Although his government showed initial fiscal prudence and has established a macroecononmic stabilisation fund, he has implemented popular land reform, renewed government involvement in providing or regulating basic services such as education and poverty relief, and tried to re-centralise the government. On the other hand, Chávez has respected civil liberties and democratic institutions more than some classic populists, has not made significant or successful efforts at co-opting secondary associations such as the CTV (the national labour federation), and has encouraged the inclusion of certain progressive mechanisms in the new constitution, such as voter initiative, referendum, and recall.

I accept Ellner's clarification, but my purpose in this paper is different. I will not focus on these qualifying adjectives, but on the more fundamental ones that allow us to categorise Chávez's movement as, simply, populist. In doing so, I will naturally emphasise some of the more negative attributes of Chavismo. I consider this an important exercise in its own right, insofar as *these populist attributes are inherently anti-democratic*. To ignore this is to ignore the negative potential that was inherent in the movement from its start. I emphasise that it is difficult and perhaps impossible to build democracy on a foundation of populism like that we see in Venezuela; Venezuelans, especially Chávez and the many people in his movement who support him out of a sincere desire to improve Venezuela's political economy, need to recognise these inherent contradictions in order to defuse the extreme polarisation that has taken place over the past five years.

Charismatic linkages

To begin with Chavismo represents a charismatic mode of linkage. Interviews with Chávez and commentaries in leading news magazines in the months before the 1998 election actually used the word 'charisma' to describe Chávez's appeal to the electorate (*Primicias*, 10 February 1998: 18). However, as seen in the history given above, the evidence for the charismatic base of Chavismo appears long before he breaks onto the public scene in 1992. This is important because, as

Tucker (1970) says in his analysis of the causes of charismatic leadership, 'We may lay it down as a general rule that when a leader-personality is genuinely charismatic, his charisma will begin to manifest itself before he becomes politically powerful' (p 78).

Chávez's biographers provide considerable evidence of this nascent charisma. Their accounts of the formation of his movement (mostly written after the coup and before the 1998 election) are obviously not the most objective commentaries on Chávez's character, but they have a wealth of documentation that paints a picture of a leader of early talent and sense of purpose. The way in which they construct his image—the choice of quotations and documents they include, and sometimes even their personal estimations of his character—reaffirms their personal belief in Chávez's early populist vocation.

For example, Douglas Bravo, the leader of an earlier, civilian leftist–nationalist movement that initially had ties to MBR 200 but subsequently broke with Chávez, describes Chávez in a 1999 interview:

> I know Chávez pretty well. I've known him since 1982, him and other officers that were part of the [conspiratorial] organization ... Chávez is a man who is intelligent, bold, communicative, charismatic. A natural leader. With a gift of command. (Garrido, 1999: 21)

In a later interview, Nelson 'Harold' Sánchez, a fellow conspirator with Douglas Bravo and the initial go-between with Hugo Chávez in the early 1980s, describes Chávez in similar terms:

> Hugo was always sensitive, simple, communicative, and charismatic. Hugo wins over other people easily. He won over us, other officers, the cadets ... The great capacity for work that he had and continues to have is indisputable. (Garrido, 2000: 53)

Longer, more detailed references to Chávez's charisma are found in two key books written shortly after the coup of 1992: *Rebelión de los Angeles*, an account of the February 1992 coup plotters written by Angela Zago, a Venezuelan journalist; and *Habla el Comandante*, a series of interviews with Hugo Chávez by Agustín Blanco Muñoz, a Venezuelan scholar.

Rebelión de los Angeles reveals Zago's admiration for Chávez and his co-conspirators. In recounting events, the results of interviews, and the writings of Chávez or some of those who knew and admired him, Zago describes the personal qualities of Chávez that she thinks raise him above the stature of the corrupt, cynical politicians of the day (p 72). Zago paints a picture of a man who spends his time secretly meeting with the members of the movement and organising discussions of texts, journalistic accounts, and of the movement's plans to radically transform Venezuelan democracy. In this effort, Chávez labours unceasingly, sacrificing sleep and risking discovery (p 86); his political efforts mirror the selfless, almost anonymous service that he and other soldiers render as part of their regular military duties, the '*trabajo de hormiguitas*' (labour of little ants) unnoticed by the national media or the politicians (p 83). This patriotic rendering of Chávez and the other officers is significant coming from Zago, a former guerrilla who grew up mistrusting the military (pp 17–20). For Zago,

Chávez and his co-conspirators are the true patriots. She reviews Chávez's military career before 1992, frequently recounting his outreach efforts towards local civilians, activities such as patriotic community celebrations and service projects. Wherever he is assigned, he attempts to mobilise and influence the masses, to make the military more activist and more involved in the local community and the building the nation (pp 77–78, 83). In Zago's words, 'Possibly these towns [where Chávez was stationed] remember with greater enthusiasm the work done by the army with Commander Hugo Chávez at the head than the speedy visits made by a few political leaders' (pp 77–78). She notes his extraordinary combination of erudition and education (his poetic writings, his speeches, his postgraduate education in political science) with a middle-class background and a familiarity with the people. She describes a man who has supreme self-confidence and a clear sense of mission, someone who seeks to embody the high ideals of Venezuelan patriots (pp 73–74, 78).

Zago suggests that this self-confidence and vision begins when Chávez is a young officer. Consider the following excerpt from his journal, describing a speech he gave to an elementary school in 1977:

> In the morning, I went to give a presentation about the life of Bolivar in the Normal School of Cumaná, there were about 500 students filling a multipurpose room, the walkway around the stage was completely full, in the form of a U, before me. When I was standing on the stage before beginning, the school choir sang the National Anthem. I then felt a great emotion, I felt the blood surge through my veins, and my spirit burned so much, that I gave one of my best presentations of the many I have given ... I spoke to them about Bolivar, about our people. At the end, the students couldn't stop applauding, and then I felt like I was somewhere else, it seemed to me that I was carried away to a future time as I stood before those gathered youth. Gathered youth ... lacking direction, the future of our country. It seemed to me at the moment, that it might be that I would achieve what I desired and become happy. (p 61)

In describing his later work as professor in the Military Academy from 1983 to 1985, Zago describes a Chávez who is more than a teacher of facts, but an advocate and organiser who leads his students through the study of the work of national patriots and combines these with discussions around current national problems (pp 67–68). Zago seeks to convince the sceptical reader, jaded by ordinary politicians, that Chávez is the real article: 'There is no contradiction. If he is young, believing, upright, and raised by a family of honest educators that respect that principles of the Fatherland and its symbols and leaders, we should expect nothing less from him' (p 62).

Likewise, *Habla el Comandante* paints a picture of a humble yet gifted leader, a messiah likely to end the cycle of 'pillaging, appropriation, and extermination' of the '*pueblo-pobreza*' that Venezuela has experienced since the arrival of Columbus and the conquest of American lands. In the interviews Chávez repeatedly denies this description: 'I consider myself neither caudillo nor messiah' (p 28). However, these expressions of humility are either discounted by the author or taken as a reaffirmation of Chávez's true charismatic potential. According to the author in his introduction to the volume:

> It should not be forgotten that we are standing before a spent model, in conditions of existence that herald new times. Nevertheless, at the beginning, the agent of change that comes into action is one that we could call traditional, that is, the old and familiar savior-caudillo with its messianic accent, purpose, and projection. (pp 22–23)

These testimonies of Chávez's early charismatic attributes are significant, but for most Venezuelans the first evidence of Chávez's personal qualities were manifested in the waning hours of the attempted coup of February 1992. Popular accounts of the rise of Chávez typically emphasise the key moment when Chávez was allowed to appear before the television cameras to call on his troops to lay down their arms. I have personally heard some of these accounts from former Chavistas I know, but one of the best published accounts is that given by Moisés Naím, a Venezuelan economist who could hardly be called a follower of Chávez:

> Impeccably dressed in uniform, showing no sign of fatigue or stress, Chávez delivered a short speech, first emphasizing his Bolivarian values, then stating:
>
> Unfortunately, *for now*, the objectives we sought were not achieved in the capital city. That is, we in Caracas could not take control of power. You, there in the interior, did a great job. But it is time now to avoid further bloodshed; it is time to reflect. We will have new situations. The country definitely has to embark on the road to a better destiny.
>
> Chávez ... was a compelling and uncommon sight for television viewers accustomed to the verbal and political maneuverings of traditional politicians: a public figure who acknowledged that he personally had failed while others had done a great job; who maintained an unfaltering position even after failure and defeat; who faced responsibility and did not try to evade the repercussions of his actions. His televised image conveyed the possibility of change, a break from the political and economic schemes usually blamed for the country's problems. A new face unrelated to the traditional power structures and offering to guide the nation back to prosperity, equality, and integrity was an item that, regardless of its packaging, was bound to appeal to a mass audience. That the item was, in fact, a primitive army tyrant was easily concealed by the illusion that any change meant progress. (1993: 101–102)

Venezuelans' affection for Chávez initially declined after he was released from prison, but it acquired new strength during the election campaign of 1998. Focus-group data recorded during the campaign manifest the initial affection and confidence of Venezuelans for Chávez, the kind of fervent, committed support that, as one of his biographers noted, few Venezuelans would have been willing to manifest for their traditional politicians (Zago, 1992). The data from these focus group interviews demonstrates the degree to which both supporters and opponents of Chávez saw him as a capable leader and the man of the hour. For example, participants in these focus groups felt saddened by what was happening in Venezuela, impotent to change it, and very angry with the politicians responsible (Consultores 21, 1998: 10–13). They showed a strong desire for radical change (Consultores 21, 1998: 13), and sought a presidential candidate who was firm and decisive, independent, young, and a patriot (Consultores 21, 1998: 21–22). Participants in the focus groups not only knew who Chávez was, but felt strongly about him one way or the other, seeing him as a soldier who had

taken on the system and the powers-that-be, a man of strength, decisiveness, and cleverness, someone who 'will show a strong hand in making the changes we need' (p 27).

Interestingly, the analysts who carried out these focus groups emphasised in their conversations with me just how much of a difference Chávez made in the political climate. They claimed that survey respondents and focus group participants identified with Chávez as they would with a brother, and that his appearance had injected a dose of optimism and interest in politics that these pollsters had not seen in years. Chávez was an 'unprecedented (*inédito*) phenomenon (interview with Roberto Zapata, 5 November 1999).

These strong feelings of trust and admiration for Chávez's leadership extended much higher than the level of the masses. In my interviews with several of the top leaders of MVR and the National Assembly in autumn 1999, May 2000 and February 2003, all the party leaders reaffirmed the powerful charismatic authority of Chávez, how it had attracted them to the party, and how it was the glue holding the party together. For example:

> *Why did you join MVR?* To contribute to the progressive forces for the transformation of the country ... and because the leader of the movement was Hugo Chávez. (Interview No 13.1 [with head of one of the party's functional Directorates], December 1999)
>
> Chávez is the source of legitimacy of the party. (Interview with William Lara, 20 February 2003).
>
> [MVR] has come together around a *leader*, not an *idea*. (Interview No 18.1 [with former Vice-President of Venezuela], 9 December 1999)
>
> It's not like in AD—it's the leader that carries along the people. (Interview No 03.1 [candidate to Latin American Parliament], 30 May 2000)
>
> *So, is this just a party based on Chávez?* Yes. (Interview No 01.1 [member of National Constituent Assembly], 7 June 2000)

Again, all these confessions of support emphasise not the particulars of Chávez's programme of change, but the leader who embodies the programme. It is the Chavistas' confidence in his character that brings them together, rather than specific goods and services that are promised or the Bolivarian ideology that Chávez expounds.

Institutionalisation of the movement

Chávez's movement shows a corresponding lack of institutionalisation. Organisationally the movement approached the 1998 elections as a loose, ideologically diverse coalition of parties, associations and individuals, initially including old parties that had split from AD in the 1960s (such as MEP), Bandera Roja (a radical leftist organisation with a strong base in the universities), the PPT (a split from the New Left La Causa Radical which had catalysed the turn from the traditional parties in the early 1990s), Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), the largest and most moderate of the New Left parties formed since the 1970s, and businessmen such

as Gustavo Cisneros. Their actions were initially co-ordinated by a loose committee of close advisors to Chávez which included former political gadflies and leaders of the left such as Jose Vicente Rangel and Luis Miquilena (Garrido, 2000: 12). However, the organisational core of the movement, especially in its electoral efforts, has been Movimiento V República (MVR), the party founded in 1997 to head up the electoral campaign for Chávez and most other non-traditional candidates for Congress and local offices.

Although Chávez's broader movement obviously has a low level of institutionalisation (as almost any new electoral coalition would), the lack of independent identity and rule basis in his own party is extraordinary. Consider first its identity. As the above quotes from party leaders suggest, far more people supported MVR because of their identification with Chávez than because of their identification with the party. Supporters and opponents of Chávez are much more likely to use the term *chavista* than *emeverrista.* Although MVR had a *casa* or office in almost every municipality in Venezuela, the actual membership base is much less tied to the party than were *adecos* or *copeyanos* to theirs. None of the people on the street that I spoke to in 1999 and 2000 even knew where the party's national offices were, while the headquarters of AD and COPEI were well known landmarks.[6] The party relied on two symbols—a red paratrooper's beret and a silhouette of a soldier's face under the beret—that represented Chávez's role as leader of the February 1992 coup (Chávez was a paratrooper). That the party depended heavily on Chávez's authority and popularity was evidenced by party leaders from MVR and even other coalition members who talked about taking difficult decisions or controversies to Chávez (Lugo Galicia, 2000; Delgado, 2000a,b). The importance of Chávez's coat tails was painfully evident in all MVR's campaigns and even in the party's choice of symbols. In campaign posters for the 2000 elections, candidates routinely appeared standing next to Chávez or with a picture of their face next to his, and high party officials frankly admitted in interviews that mere association with Chávez was enough to guarantee any candidate an instant boost in the polls (Interview No 01.01 7 June 2000).

The rule basis of the party is also extremely weak. On paper the party strongly resembles the organisation of the traditional parties, AD and COPEI. According to the original party statutes from 1997, MVR divides its organisation geographically into national, state, municipal, and parish levels. At each of these levels are identical sets of sectoral and executive organisations. The executive organisations include an executive committee, the Comando Táctico Nacional (CTN) (National Tactical Command), that should meet weekly and manage the party on a daily basis; a slightly larger National Strategic Directorate that should meet every few months and concern itself with longer-term goals; and an even larger Patriotic Council that should meet every two years and serve as the highest authority in the party.[7] The sectoral bodies are called Directorates (Directorios), and they include a set of sectoral divisions that are similar to those of AD and COPEI; these are incorporated into the small, powerful executive body, the CTN, where the heads of each Directorate were given executive standing. Finally, in an organisational twist reminiscent of AD's Local Committees and COPEI's Base Committees, MVR is supposed to organise a series of small groups at the base of the party called the Patriotic Circles, consisting of at least three party members who meet frequently

to discuss and implement party politics at the local level or within secondary associations to which they belong.

More detailed plans with some modifications of MVR's original structure were proposed in a document circulated by the national Secretary of Organisation in October 1999. These proposed changes would have made MVR's organisation even more like that of AD and COPEI. Many of the changes were simply changes of names, changes that made them sound even more like their organisational counterparts in the traditional parties. One of the more noteworthy proposals was to hold a national convention called the National Patriotic Assembly every three years, much like AD and COPEI did. As with the conventions in AD and COPEI, the National Patriotic Assembly would be composed of executives from national, regional, municipal, and parish directorates, as well as delegates chosen at more local levels under rules dictated by the national executive committee, and it would supposedly retain ultimate decision-making authority in the party.

Underlying all these organisational efforts is the hope of creating a more democratic, bottom-up party. Although their organisational forms are similar to those of the traditional parties, party leaders speak of opportunities for uncoerced, unmanipulated participation in the party's assemblies. Candidates for government and party office are to be chosen through some kind of primary election, and ideological assemblies will be held in which the voice of the people is finally allowed to express itself.

Unfortunately, the reality of party organisation has been quite different from these plans. First, the level of internal democracy has been very low. Most decisions in MVR—including key decisions about candidate nominations and the selection of party leadership—are still being made at the national level, particularly in the CTN. According to interviewees, the CTN was the forum where candidate lists were approved for all elections up to 2000. Candidates for the 1998 presidential/legislative elections, the 1999 Constituent Assembly elections, and the 2000 'mega' elections were all chosen by the national executive leadership; where multiple candidates from the party were competing for the same seat, opinion polls were used to make the final cut—a technique originally developed by leaders of AD in the mid-1990s (Interview No 12.1; Duarte, 2000: D2).[8] With regard to party leadership, all have been chosen by consensus among the national leaders rather than through a process of internal elections, including those chosen to fill vacancies since the party's original organisation. In interviews party leaders assured me that a national assembly was planned for the future, but the assembly was repeatedly postponed because elections for government always seemed to get in the way (Interviews Nos. 18.1 and 12.1, 1999).

Second, the rule-based structure is much less important than the voice of Chávez. Admittedly, many of the decision-making organs mentioned above currently exist in the party and carry out work—but only down to the municipal level; below this, the party rarely exists on a permanent basis. The CTN played an important role in selecting candidates to government office (Duarte, 2000: D2), but not all the action is in the CTN. Because of the party's control of government and the clear place of Chávez in holding the party together, many important decisions and bargaining also occur in small meetings directed by Chávez, although he does not exercise dictatorial powers over the party so much as

relying on his overwhelming popular appeal and status among other party leaders to arbitrate in their disputes and encourage consensus. For example, one interviewee was quick to point out that some of Chávez's choices for candidates in previous elections were rejected by other members of the CTN, and that he went along with their preferences (Interview No 12.1, December 2000). That said, the CTN seems weaker and less effective than the national executive committees of the traditional parties. During 2001 it actually went for three months without meeting at all (Lugo Galicia, 2001).

In February 2003 I returned to Venezuela and followed up with party leadership on the process of party institutionalisation. They informed me that no ideological conference, national convention, or internal elections had been held, that crucial opportunities to engage in them had been squandered, and that there were no immediate plans for them. William Lara, former President of the National Assembly and a top leader of MVR, was very frank in his assessment of the party. He reaffirmed that the party was born as an 'alluvial movement ... of electoral nature' and he lamented the fact that its leadership showed very little initiative in their work or in the process of strengthening the party; they tended to rely excessively on instructions or cues from Chávez. Consequently, the party lacks the ability to come up with creative public policies for dealing with the present economic crisis, and it is still incapable of training new political leadership. Nonetheless, Lara remained optimistic that the process of institutionalisation could still be carried out, claiming that the party's association with Chávez gave it a historical opportunity to become a strong party (interview with William Lara, 20 February 2003).

One of the most extraordinary manifestations of the party's lack of importance in Chavismo and the correspondingly greater importance of Chávez himself can be seen in the Círculos Bolivarianos, the new base-level unit of organisation in the movement. Chávez and his associates originally conceived of the Círculos as a kind of branch of the Bolivarian movement in civil society, part of a 'National Bolivarian Front' (Blanco Muñoz, 1998: 286–287, 297–298). As mentioned, the party statutes for MVR included a similar idea called 'Círculos Patrióticos' as the base-level unit of the party organisation.

However, little if anything was done about actually organising any kind of Círculos at the time the party was founded. The formation of the Círculos only began after a speech by Chávez in April 2001 in which he called for the organisation of society into 'Círculos Bolivarianos', using the term as such. Organisation proceeded, and in December of that year according to plan, Chávez swore in more than 30 000 new members in a public ceremony in Caracas. According to Rodrigo Chaves, current National Co-ordinator of the Círculos Bolivarianos, the Círculos are meant to be a kind of alternative civil society to the old neighbourhood associations. The Círculos are both territorial and functional, consisting of at least seven members who work or live in close proximity and choose some kind of function or mission for their Círculo, such as forming a neighbourhood soup kitchen, organising an agricultural co-operative, or supporting one of the parties belonging to Chávez's coalition. Thus physically proximate Círculos can have very different functions, or there can be Círculos with territorially overlapping jurisdictions. Each Círculo is also encouraged to engage in the study of

the Bolivarian ideology, a kind of leftist–nationalist ideology based on the writings of three Venezuelan patriots from the 19th century: Simon Rodríguez, Ezequiel Zamora and, of course, Simon Bolivar. The idea is to encourage self-help and community development 'from below' (interview with Rodrigo Chaves, 18 February 2003).

For now, the Círculos have little if any government financing and are largely dependent on the contributions of their members or (when they have benign purposes) access to state development funds through regular channels. However, they are dependent on the government for recognition and regulation. New Círculos register with the National Co-ordinator's office. The National Co-ordinator is selected by Chávez and operates as a part of the executive branch, with its main office in the old chancellery building opposite the executive office building in Miraflores. The Círculos Bolivarianos' national website, through which new Círculos can register online, was initially located on the website of the Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic (http://www.venezuela.gov.ve/ns/index.htm). According to the website, 'The highest leader of Bolivarian Circles shall be the President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela'.

One of the most interesting organisational twists of the Círculos Bolivarianos is that they are being used as a surrogate for the Círculos Patrióticos originally envisioned as the base unit for MVR. As already mentioned, the base units of the party were never really organised. According to party leaders I interviewed, the plan is now to organise MVR's Círculos Patrióticos out of Círculos Bolivarianos that want to dedicate themselves to the purpose of supporting MVR. Thus, the party has piggybacked on the broader efforts being made by Chávez and his associates (some of them from outside MVR) to create a mass organisational base for the movement. The fact that the Círculos Bolivarianos are in some sense ultimately responsible to the 'President of the Republic' is not seen by party organisers as problematic. The party has adopted a strategy reminiscent of the *pronasolización* of the PRI in Mexico that Carlos Salinas attempted to carry out during his presidency. This was a strategy in which locally organised committees for government aid and self-help were seen as a potential new base of support for the party that could respond directly to the presidency (Dresser, 1991).

Discourse

Not only is Chavismo a poorly institutionalised manifestation of charismatic linkages, but it is built on a strong, classic populist discourse revolving around the notion of *el pueblo* and the capacity of the movement and its leader to embody a singular popular will. It is therefore a populist rather than a liberal democratic discourse. The interviews with Chávez in *Habla el Comandante* provide ample evidence of this kind of discourse, one in which Chávez and his followers strongly believe. For Chávez, 'The people are the fuel of the engine of history' (p 87). Chávez views history in a teleological way (pp 28–29), with himself as a protagonist in a great process with a definite end, as the following interview indicates:

> *What do you mean by saying that you are just one small part of the process? Do you place the collective ahead of the individual*? Yes ... I believe that what a man attempts is small when he places himself before the forces of great events. Here is where the importance of history lies ... I consider that men can place themselves, in a particular moment, in the position of protagonists that accelerate, that slow down, that give a little personal, distinctive push to the process. But I believe that history is the product of the collective being of peoples. And I feel I have given myself over completely to that collective being. (p 28)

For Chávez, history is a struggle by 'the people' against the forces of oppression and imperialism, a struggle in which 'the people' will eventually triumph (p 292).

> What we do is believe in the strength of the people, believe in the rebellious man of Albert Camus, that solidarity that brings the people to unity ... And I believe that there is a change in the people-as-object, in the people as subject of its own history, transforming itself as it discovers its potential strength. And when that 'poverty-people,' which is the consciousness of strength, becomes a protagonist, not even the army would dare oppose it. (p 32)

The poor and marginalised occupy a privileged position in this group that constitutes 'the people'. Thus:

> God is the Christ that was crucified for fighting together with his people against an empire, the Christ that according to the Christian doctrine came down from the cross, was resurrected, and went through the world to fight on behalf of the *desposeidos*. (p 119)

Chávez and those who work with him see their goal as defending and organising 'the people' and expressing their will:

> It is unlikely they can 'twist our arm' such that the movement would serve interests that are not those of the majority, those of the 'poverty-people,' the marginalized classes. That's where our movement is headed, that's what it feeds itself from, and consequently that's where it should orient its transforming action. (pp 80–81)

If Chávez and his movement represents the popular will, those who oppose them are the corrupt elites, the *cogollos* and the *cupulas del poder* (the cabals and chambers of power), the *escualidos* (the filthy ones), the elites and leaders of the traditional parties. There is a strong Manichaean vision in the Chavista discourse. For example, during a speech before election day in 1998, he declared, 'The rotten elites of the parties are boxed in, and they will soon be consigned to the trashbin of history ... Inside of 8 days we make the final assault to remove the corrupt elites from power ... We are in times of the Apocalypse. You can no longer be on the side of the Devil and the side of God' (de la Cruz, 1998). When some of Chávez's former co-conspirators split from MVR to run against him in the 2000 elections, he labelled them 'traitors' and during the week preceding Easter of that year compared them with Judas. Participants in the recent national strike were called *golpistas* (coup plotters) and 'saboteurs' (while his own attempted coup was a 'movement' or 'rebellion' (Blanco Muñoz, 1998; Zago, 1994)). The four main private television stations that often oppose Chávez are called the 'Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse ... who trample the truth, sow terror and fear and create ghosts for our children' (Associated Press, 7 February 2003).

Concern for large numbers, and declining respect for democratic procedure

Chavismo manifests the two characteristics of populism associated with this Manichaean discourse. First, there is a strong concern for mobilising large numbers. This was particularly evident in the interviews I recently conducted. At least two of my interviewees spent several minutes at the beginning of our conversations giving unsolicited descriptions of the injustices suffered by the bulk of the population during the past 40 years of the old democratic regime, claiming that 80% of the people had been left in poverty and that this demonstrated the gross corruption and democratic illegitimacy of that regime (Interview with Rodrigo Chaves, 18 February 2003; Interview with Aurora Morales, 20 February 2003). Given actual improvements in the level of education and standard of living for many Venezuelans over the past four decades, this figure seems to reflect a broad definition of poverty. But insofar as Chavistas equate 'the people' with the poor and exploited, the preoccupation with this evidence makes sense. Likewise, those I spoke to were well aware of the existence of the opposition and admitted that it incorporated a large number of people, but they tended to downplay its strength. In their view, the opposition was limited to a few, isolated areas in the wealthiest neighbourhoods in the eastern part of Caracas. The opposition's failure to mobilise large numbers of supporters for protests during the time I was there was seen as evidence of their popular illegitimacy and the relative support for Chávez; the fact that surveys indicated an approval rating of less than 40% was brushed aside or ignored.

Likewise an extreme concern for numbers and claims to popular representation is evident in many of the pro-Chavista accounts of the failed coup in April 2002. According to accounts in *NACLA Report on the Americas*, the *Guardian*, and 'independent' leftist periodicals often supportive of Chávez, the coup failed because of massive popular demonstrations in support of Chávez that spontaneously emerged in the hours after Chávez was asked to resign (for example, see Beasley-Murray, 2002). These accounts point out the apparent blackout by major television news outlets in the hours after the coup, calling it an attempt by the wealthy anti-Chavista elite to suppress this popular mobilisation. However, every other source I have consulted, and at least one top Chavista in an interview, reaffirmed that the failure of the coup was a much more complicated process. In large measure the coup failed because the officers in charge were unable to agree on who should be in charge, and because younger officers and key military units loyal to the president were not controlled. The pro-Chávez demonstrations involved relatively small numbers until Chávez was finally brought back to Caracas. Likewise my own conversations with people in the private media suggested that the apparent news blackout was mostly the result of armed crowds preventing the reporters and staff from entering or leaving their studios and printing plants.[9] The tendency of Chávez supporters to see the coup as a grand conspiracy or to play up the significance of pro-Chávez demonstrators confirms a preoccupation with large numbers, a need to show that the coup went against the will of the people.

Second, while the revolution is peaceful and democratic in the sense that it technically follows democratic procedure (Chávez and his supporters have won

reasonably free and fair elections), its Manichaean discourse has fostered a strong 'anything goes' attitude that allows the spirit of the procedure, and occasionally the procedure itself, to be violated. For example, Chavistas freely used their control over electoral rules to their advantage in the election to the Constituent Assembly in 1999,[10] and they used state resources to support the referendum to approve the new constitution that same year. After the end of the recent national strike, Chávez fired over 10 000 government oil workers who participated (roughly one-third of PDVSA's workforce). Recently, in announcing new controls over the exchange rate and foreign currencies, Chávez announced on television that 'there wouldn't be a single dollar more for the *golpistas*', referring to businesses that participated in the recent national strike (Hernández Lavado, 2003).[11] In mid-February 2003, after a Sunday television address in which Chávez called on the nation's judiciary to act against the leaders of the strike, the head of Fedecamaras (the national Chamber of Commerce) was placed under house arrest.

Chávez and his supporters have also shown a willingness to curtail the private media when they give them negative coverage, arguing that freedom of speech and the press is a subordinate right to the other goals of the revolution. As mentioned already, Chávez has used national laws regarding special government broadcasts to make frequent long speeches on television that all the stations are required to transmit at their own expense. He personally made 13 of these in January 2003, during the national strike; the longest was three hours.[12] Chávez and his supporters are currently attempting other measures designed to bridle or punish the media. The National Assembly is trying to pass a law that would set aside most of daylight viewing time (from 6 am to 8 pm) as 'protected' time for children in which nothing with objectionable sexual, violent, or health content may be broadcast; content would be regulated by a commission appointed by the President of the Republic.[13] Chávez has frequently condemned reporters and editors by name in his news broadcasts. Media outlets and journalists are routinely threatened and injured by Chávez supporters, their facilities attacked or equipment stolen, and at least one journalist has been killed. These actions represent a quantum leap beyond the level of intimidation that the Venezuelan media endured under previous governments (see reports published by the Committee to Protect Journalists at www.cpj.org).

One of the most widely talked about (and misunderstood) examples of the 'anything goes' attitude of many Chavistas are the Círculos Bolivarianos. Although most of the Círculos have a peaceful function, a few of them have a much darker side, acquiring weapons and taking it upon themselves to defend the revolution or carry out Chávez's suggestive criticisms of his opponents on his weekly television broadcasts.[14] During the failed ouster of Chávez in April 2002 some Círculos reacted violently to events. Assuming that private media outlets were partly behind the coup, a large mob of Chavistas attacked the headquarters of one of the television stations in Caracas and threatened to burn the building while a number of reporters was still inside; similar groups gathered outside other media outlets and threatened employees. Members of Círculos have occasionally attacked local police forces, which they (and Chávez) see as beholden to opposition mayors; indeed, the military recently stripped the Caracas metropolitan

police force of its weapons and riot gear and assumed patrolling responsibilities in the western half of the city.

I hasten to emphasise that in many of these incidents those carrying out the acts of violence were not apparently receiving direct orders from Chávez, and they were not always acting as official representatives of the government or even of particular Círculos. As a movement, Chavismo is simply not that well organised, and Chávez is careful to avoid acting in ways that violate the letter of the law. However, Chávez's inflammatory remarks are taken as important cues by some of those who follow him, and their illegal or unethical actions often go unpunished. Some of the Chavistas whom I interviewed justified these actions by arguing that opposition leaders 'had it coming to them', that those leaders were 'saboteurs' and *golpistas* who did not know how to behave like a responsible opposition. They claimed the opposition was lucky that Chávez and the government had shown so much restraint and respect for democratic procedure. In recalling threats and aggressive acts that they themselves had received from the opposition, one Chavista said that 'No democratic government has had to endure what we have had to', and she resisted the suggestion that Chávez had an imperative to show a higher example of respect and restraint than his opponents (Interview 13.3, 20 February 2003).

None of this is meant to deny the fact that Chavistas have suffered their own insults and injuries at the hands of the opposition (for example, the national headquarters of MVR was destroyed by a mob during the recent national strike), nor that some members of the opposition in turn see themselves as the legitimate embodiment of Venezuelan values and nationhood. However, Chavistas have shown themselves very willing to use or justify undemocratic political tactics in the pursuit of their cause.

Conclusion

Chavismo closely fits the minimal definition of populism proposed in this article and in recent work by other scholars. It embodies a charismatic mode of linkage between the voters and the leaders of the movement (especially Chávez), and bases itself on an ostensibly democratic pursuit of votes in order to legitimate its claims to represent 'the people' against a corrupt elite. In fact, Chavismo fits this concept of populism in a way that is remarkably reminiscent of classic modes of populism, insofar as Chávez and his supporters strongly believe in their popular rhetoric—they sincerely seek to represent a common popular will that they especially ascribe to the poorest groups in society.

However, as I hope I have also made clear, this populism is not good for democratic consolidation in Venezuela, despite the participatory democratic rhetoric of Chávez's supporters. The constitutional changes, the breakdown of the old party system, and the incipient organisation of Círculos Bolivarianos are far from sufficient reasons to hail Chavismo as a benefit to Venezuelan democracy. First, these organisations either seem to have a lack of objectives or permanence beyond their affection for Chávez, or they are being tied to the national executive in a way that contradicts their stated purpose of generating development-from-below. As the example of other Latin American countries has shown, the

charismatic linkages inherent in populism lead to institutionalised autonomous civil society more by accident than by design.[15] Second, the Manichaean discourse of populism—made sharper by the sincere idealism of Chávez's supporters—engenders an anything-goes attitude that is polarising Venezuelan society and making it more likely that the nation will be ungovernable for whoever ends up in charge over the next few years. Thus the two qualities of populism embodied by Chavismo—its charismatic linkages and its divisive democratic discourse—threaten to undermine the original goals of the movement.

Notes

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1 Technically these definitions do not limit programmatic linkages to policy, but they do limit clientelistic linkages to selective incentives. However, this distinction is not crucial here.

2 The first part of this history relies heavily on documented sources, since I was not a first-hand witness of these events.

3 MBR 200 had originally planned to carry out the coup together with LCR, but the leadership of LCR backed out in the year or two preceding the coup, and the remaining group of civilian allies was prevented from participating effectively by a series of communication errors and last minute changes in the military's plans. For a first-hand description of these failed efforts, see Medina (1999).

4 On 27 November of that year, other sympathetic elements of the military attempted a second coup and were again defeated by pro-government forces. The leaders fled to Peru but eventually returned; some of them initially joined Chávez and his movement.

5 For example, Chávez inaugurated a public works programme called Plan Bolivar 2000 that channelled funds for community projects directly through the military, involving the soldiers in the execution of the projects. The programme reportedly resulted in some misuse of funds, and some of the public works deteriorated because of poor construction. Likewise, in directing rescue and reconstruction efforts in the coastal areas affected by massive mudslides in December 1999, the government rejected some of the aid offered by the US government, and government workers made attempts to re-label aid from outside sources with Chávez's name. These kinds of incidents didn't mean that all the projects were flawed and corrupt or that the government was doing anything that previous governments hadn't done, but they were very disillusioning for Venezuelans who had hoped for dramatic change.

6 Interestingly, the one MVR building that was well known at the time (a stand-alone house painted the party's colours, yellow and red, and located next to a prominent avenue in Caracas) was not the official headquarters. It was the location of the Directorate of Electoral Organisation, the centre of the party's database of electoral activists—probably the most active part of the party during its initial two-and-a-half years of repeated referenda and elections.

7 Although theree was no specified national convention (and none has been held since the party first organised), these three executive bodies were extremely similar to the executive bodies in AD and COPEI in terms of composition, meeting times, and responsibilities. For example, the CTN, AD's National Executive Committee and COPEI's National Committee all meet weekly, are composed of a set of 20–50 leaders which includes the heads of the functional organisations, and exercise effective control over much of their party's candidates and programmes. Likewise in all three parties these small executive bodies are supposedly supervised by larger bodies that incorporate leaders and delegates from the states. And in all three parties these national leaders are chosen indirectly, through a kind of electoral college of leaders chosen at lower levels.

8 The decision at the level of the coalition is more flexible. Polls were ostensibly used to make the final decision at this level as well; however, the choices have generated controversy, especially where MVR and MAS have overriden candidates from PPT who were incumbents (Mayorca, 2000: D1).

9 Some of the owners of the television stations came out later and apologised for their lack of coverage.

10 Under the highly majoritarian rules, 60% of the vote translated into over 90% of the seats for MVR and its allies. Moreover, after the election rules had been established—rules that specified non-partisan

candidacies—supporters of the Patriotic Pole published a cheat sheet of candidate lists that violated the spirit if not the letter of the law.

11 This extra-juridicial punishment would presumably drive many businesses to bankruptcy since most of them (especially the print and broadcast media outlets) have to import a portion of their inputs.

12 Under Venezuelan law, the government can require private broadcastters to 'chain' themselves to the national television station and broadcast its transmissions for a limited period of a few hours; hence these special broadcasts are called *cadenas* (chains). In the past such broadcasts were primarily used on special occasions or national emergencies, a few times a year.

13 Although the law is officially described as a measure to protect children, many Venezuelans assume that it is designed to punish and control the private media.

14 I spoke to one of the aides to the National Co-ordination for the Círculos who proudly admitted that he leads a secret armed 'commando unit' in Caracas that is ready to defend the revolution.

15 For example, see Jonathan Fox's (1994) study of clientelism and citizenship in Mexico.

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